

Decoding the Labyrinth: Rome in Arabic and Persian Medieval Literature

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Abstract

The city of Rome is described in a number of Arabic and Persian geographical and historical texts produced between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Despite the chronological range and geographical distances that separate many of these texts, a common thread of transmission unites them, testament to the fact that very few eyewitness accounts of the city were used. Instead, the descriptions of Rome drew on the authority of more ancient literary accounts, that were reproduced with variations and additions deriving from a number of different origins. While it is not possible to identify the exact web of sources used, nor whether some descriptions refer to Old Rome—the city of the Pope—or to the new Rome on the Bosphorus, Constantinople, these texts nevertheless reveal a substantial knowledge of the city's symbolic features. Indeed, it appears that accurate physical descriptions of Rome were considered less important than exemplary representations of the city. One of the figurative details assumes the iconographic form of a labyrinth, at times identified as a map of the city of Rome, and at other times as a prison located in the city. In this paper, it will be argued that the labyrinth icon is drawn from one of Rome's own myths concerning the founding of the city by complex and at times obscure means that offer promising directions for further research. More generally, it would appear that the Arabic and Persian sources considered here share a view of the city of Rome that is nourished by a great respect and admiration.

Keywords

Rome, Constantinople, labyrinth, Arabic geography, Persian geography

Hic labor ille domus et inextricabilis error

Aeneid VI, 27

The Account

The labyrinth referred to in the title is a presumed topographical map of Rome preserved in a 1410 manuscript of a Persian historical work from the twelfth century. We will return to this work, but the labyrinth is also a perfect metaphor for the difficulty one has understanding the complicated collections of interrelated medieval Arabic and Persian texts dealing with Rome, *Rūmiy(y)a* or *Rūma* in the medieval nomenclature. The complexity derives mainly from the difficulty in ascertaining the actual reference of accounts that are too often clouded by the unlikelihood of the wonders described therein, by the confluence and overlap of descriptions of distinct and distant places, and by the frequent lack of links with the Roman history and geography that we know.

In the medieval period, notable descriptions of Rome can be found in a number of Arabic and Persian texts, especially in geographical and historical works, spanning approximately the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. Despite the long chronological arc and the geographical distances that separated these works, it is possible to trace a number of common textual threads, that in general appear to derive from literary sources. Such textual links were facilitated by the frequent and wide circulation of books that characterised the Islamic world in the Abbasid period, as well as the intense permeability that existed between the Arabic and Persian literary fields, especially within the same genre. In many of these texts Rome was not the result of eyewitness accounts. Indeed, Khalil Samir observes that, of the seventeen Arab geographers he examined, “nobody saw the city; not even al-Idrīsī, although he lived in Palermo, working for King Roger II of Sicily.” This lack of eyewitnesses, along with certain other elements that will be discussed below, provides the basis for a key aspect of these accounts: the use in the descriptions of Rome of features pertaining to the second Rome, Constantinople. In many cases, it is possible to trace details that unequivocally refer to the city of Rome, especially in the accounts produced in the western regions of the Islamic world (Maghreb and Andalus), for the obvious reason of closer geographical proximity to the city. This does not so much imply, however, that these descriptions were based on direct observations, as much as it shows a dependence on a diverse web of literary sources, either Latin or Byzantine, or others.

The main accounts of Rome dealt with in this study are included in the following: the Arabic *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (“Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms”) by Ibn Khurradādhbih, of Iranian family, settled in

Baghdad (born between 820-826, died between 885-912); the Arabic *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥḥa* ("Book of Precious Gems"), by the Persian Ibn Rusta (composed between 903-913); the Arabic *Kitāb dalā'il al-qibla* ("Book for the Orientation of the Qibla") by Ibn al-Qāṣṣ, born in the Iranian region of Tabaristan, but educated in Baghdad (died between 946-948); the Arabic *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* ("Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms") by the Andalusian al-Bakrī (eleventh century); the anonymous Persian *Mujmal al-tawārikh wa-l-qīṣaṣ* ("Collection of Chronicles and Stories," 1126); the Arabic *Nuḥḥat al-muḥṭaq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq* ("The Pleasure of Him Who Longs to Cross the Horizons") by al-Idrīsī (1099-1165), geographer at the Sicilian court of Roger II; the Persian *'Ajāyibnāma* ("Book of Wonders") by Hamadānī (composed ca. 1175-1193); the Arabic *Kitāb al-ishārāt ilā ma'rifat al-ziyārāt* ("Guide for the Knowledge of Pilgrimage Sites") by al-Harawī, an Iraqi traveller from a family originally from Herat (d. 1215, in Syria); the Arabic *Mu'jam al-buldān* ("Dictionary of Countries") by Yāqūt, born in Byzantine territory of non-Arab parents, but enslaved and raised as a Muslim (died 1229); the Arabic *Kitāb al-rawḍ al-mi'tār fī khabar al-aqtār* ("Book of the Fragrant Garden on the Information about the Countries") by al-Ḥimyarī (probably a Maghrebi author from the end of the thirteenth century, whose work seems to have been updated in the fifteenth century).¹ Other texts will also be taken into account as needed below.

¹ Abū al-Qāsim 'Ubayd Allāh b. 'Abd Allāh Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, ed. Michael Jan de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1889); Abū 'Alī Aḥmad Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥḥa*, ed. Michael Jan de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1892); Fuat Sezgin, "Kitāb dalā'il al-qibla li-Ibn al-Qāṣṣ (Das Buch über die Orientierung nach Mekka von Ibn al-Qāṣṣ)," *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 4 (1987-1988): 7-92; Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, eds. Adrian Van Leeuwen and André Ferré, 2 vols. (Tunis: al-Mu'assasa al-Waṭaniyya li-l-Tarjama wa-l-Taḥqīq wa-l-Dirāsāt, 1993); Muḥammad Taqī Bahār and Muḥammad Ramaḥānī, eds., *Mujmal al-tawārikh wa-l-qīṣaṣ* (Tehran: Khāwar, 1318Sh/1939); Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Idrīs al-Ḥammūdī al-Ḥasanī al-Idrīsī, *Nuḥḥat al-muḥṭaq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*. *Opus Geographicum*, eds. Alessio Bombaci et al., 9 fasc. (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1970-1984); Muḥammad Ibn-i Maḥmūd Hamadānī, *'Ajāyibnāma. Bāzkhānī-i mutūn*, ed. Ja'far Mudarris Ṣādiqī (Tehran: Nashr-i Markaz, 1375Sh/1996); Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Abī Bakr al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-ishārāt ilā ma'rifat al-ziyārāt*, ed. Janine Sourdell-Thomine (Damascus: al-Ma'had al-Faransī bi-Dimashq, 1953); Shihāb al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Yāqūt b. 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, 6 vols. (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1866-1873); Ibn 'Abd al-Mun'im Al-Ḥimyarī, *Kitāb al-rawḍ al-mi'tār fī khabar al-aqtār*, ed. by Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1975).

When considering this corpus of texts, the inevitability of numerous inconsistencies due to faults in the oral and written transmission over time and distance should not let us forget that if some of the textual traditions have survived, it is because those descriptions or narratives were valuable more in their own right than for the real object of the description. According to the effective definition present in the Koran (XII, 111), the ‘account’ (*ḥadīth*), “is a confirmation of what happened before, and a clear explanation of everything and guidance and mercy for a people who believe.” This passage refers to prophetic narrative, but the definition could also include many other types of report in Arabic literature, linked to their exemplarity rather than to their factual likelihood, according to a principle of adhesion/comparison with the history of Revelation that is very similar to the role played by the *exemplum* in Latin Christian literature.² Thus, the authority of those responsible for literary transmission enabled old textual or iconographic ‘vestiges’ to resist any updating of knowledge, and to be passed down through the centuries unaltered—although with a shift in their interpretation—in a manner parallel to other literatures throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Regarding the city of Rome, Yāqūt (1179-1229), one of the later authors considered here, but also the Arab geographer who left the most thorough descriptions, made a point of declaring that he had reported certain facts about which he had doubts because he was following the example of famous scholars before him.³

A number of studies throughout the last 150 years⁴ have attempted to provide some orienting tools for the web of Arabic and Persian sources

² There is extensive literature on this subject, a good starting point is Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), and the related bibliography.

³ See Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 2:867.

⁴ Ignazio Guidi, “La descrizione di Roma nei geografi arabi,” *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* 1 (1877): 173-218; Giustino Boson, “Descrizione di Roma in una geografia araba del 1169 dell’Egira,” *Aevum* 3 (1929): 5-12; Michelangelo Guidi, “Roma e gli Arabi,” *Roma. Rivista di studi e di vita romana* 20 (1942): 10-21; Giorgio Levi Della Vida, “The ‘Bronze Era’ in Moslem Spain,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1943): 183-191; Giorgio Levi Della Vida, “La traduzione araba delle storie di Orosio,” *Al-Andalus* 19 (1954): 257-293; Maria Nallino, “Un’inedita descrizione araba di Roma,” in *Scritti in onore di Laura Veccia Vaglieri*, vol. 1, *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale*, n.s., 14 (1964), 295-309; Maria Nallino, “‘Mirabilia’ di Roma negli antichi geografi arabi,” in *Studi in onore di Italo Siciliano*, 2 vols. (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1966), 2:875-893; Salāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, “Rome vue par les géographes musulmanes,” *Travaux at Jours*, 21 (1968): 51-61; Eliyahu Ashtor, “Che cosa sapevano i geografi arabi dell’Europa

concerning the city of Rome and—more generally—Roman history. All of the questions raised by these texts, whose philological and geo-historical reconstruction is, in many cases, still open, cannot be dealt with here in detail. Rather, in the spirit of the conference that has inspired this volume, this essay will attempt to analyze some of the most meaningful aspects of these accounts, in order to outline a few interpretative points essential to the optical lens through which these authors viewed the great capital of Christianity over the course of several centuries.

Given the premises above, when we look from a certain distance at the entire corpus of Arabic and Persian medieval sources regarding Rome, it seems less surprising that they offer almost no information on the rare occasions of direct contact with the city, such as the sack of the two Basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul Outside the Walls in 846, or the defeat of the Saracen fleet at Ostia three years later.⁵ We are offered, on the other hand, some mythological traditions on the genealogy of the Roman people (*Banū al-Asfar*, literally ‘the clan of the Yellow’, which is the equivalent of *gens*

occidentale?” *Rivista storica italiana* 81 (1969): 453–478; André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu’au milieu du 11^e siècle*, vol. 2, *Géographie arabe et représentation du monde: la terre et l’étranger* (Paris: Mouton, 1975); André Miquel, “Rome chez les géographes arabes,” *Comptes rendus des Séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, 119 (1975): 281–291; Khalil Samir, “Les confusions entre les deux Rome chez les géographes arabes médiévaux,” in *Roma fuori di Roma: istituzioni e immagini*, eds. Pierangelo Catalano and Paolo Siniscalco (Rome Università degli studi ‘La Sapienza’, 1993), 93–108; Renato Traini, “Rūmiya,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, vol. 8, eds. Clifford E. Bosworth, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 612–613; Adalgisa De Simone and Giuseppe Mandalà, *L’immagine araba di Roma. I geografi del Medioevo (secoli IX–XV)* (Bologna: Pàtron, 2002); Gianroberto Scarcia, “Roma vista dagli Arabi: appunti su Abū ‘Ubayd al-Bakrī (sec. XI),” in *Roma fra Oriente e Occidente*, Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 49, 2 vols. (Spoleto: CISAM, 2002), 1:129–171; Angelo Michele Piemontese, “Roma nella cosmografia persiana medioevale,” in *Studi sulle società e le culture del Medioevo per Girolamo Arnaldi*, eds. Ludovico Gatto and Paola Supino Martini, 2 vols. (Florence: All’Insegna del Giglio, 2002), 2:499–518; Angelo Arioli, *Le città mirabili. Labirinto arabo medioevale* (Milan: Mimesis, 2003); Mayte Penelas, “De nuevo sobre la imagen de Roma en las fuentes árabes,” *Collectanea christiana orientalia* 2 (2005): 343–352; Marco Di Branco, “Roma o Costantinopoli? Nota sull’immagine di Roma nei geografi arabi medievali,” *Nēa Rōme* 3 (2006): 181–187; Marco Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani. La Grecia e Roma nella storiografia arabo-islamica medioevale* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2009); Giuseppe Mandalà, “Roma e il labirinto nella tradizione arabo-islamica,” *Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome—Moyen Âge* 121, 1 (2009): 219–238.

⁵ A reference to maritime raids carried out by the Berbers of Spain is included in Ibn Rusta’s account (between 903 and 913); see Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a’lāq al-nafīsa*, 129.

flavia, mediated through the Hebrew filter of the term *Edom*)⁶ and on the foundation of the Capital by the ‘children of the she-wolf’ (*Ibnā’ al-dhi’ba*).⁷ In the same way, the scarcity of known reports and the numerous inconsistencies concerning the chronology and nomenclature of Roman kings, rulers and emperors, are somewhat balanced by a clear fondness for what seemed significant in the eyes of many Muslim intellectuals: the role of Rome and of Roman rulers in the history of Revelation, through its different embodiments in the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.⁸ Whereas the history of the Roman monarchy and republic is almost completely absent, the succession of emperors—apart from a number of mistakes in some name transcriptions and dating—is usually quite accurately and significantly articulated in three distinct categories: the pagan emperors, the Christian emperors who, after moving the capital from Rome to Constantinople, ruled up to the advent of Islam, and the Christian emperors who came after the message of Muḥammad.⁹ Interestingly enough, after Constantine, the chain of the ‘kings of Rūm’ includes only those of the *pars orientalis* of the Empire, ignoring those of the *pars occidentalis*, and continuing directly with the Byzantine emperors: a sign of the continuity of the two Christian capitals in Muslim eyes, and of the probable dependence of these accounts on Byzantine sources. Old Rome reappears, instead, in different textual contexts, as the city, “whose government is ruled by a king called the Pope (*al-bāb*)”¹⁰ “whom the Franks obey,

⁶ For instance in Abū al-Ḥasan, ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī al-Mas’ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab* (*Les prairies d’or*), eds. Abel Pavet de Courteille and Charles Barbier de Meynard, 12 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1861–1908), 2:294; on this question see Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, “Lettre a M. le Redacteur du *Journal Asiatique*,” *Journal Asiatique*, 3rd ser., 1 (1836): 94–96; Graziadio I. Ascoli, “Über Banu al-asfar,” *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 15 (1861): 143–144; Levi Della Vida, “The ‘Bronze Era’ in Moslem Spain,” 109–110; Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 110–112.

⁷ For instance in Abū al-Ḥasan, ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī al-Mas’ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbih wa-l-ishrāf*, ed. Michael Jan de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1894), 123.

⁸ Thus, for instance, the Iraqi historian Yā’qūbī (ninth-tenth century) devotes special attention to Titus’ conquest of Jerusalem, and Ṭabarī (historian born in Tabaristan, Iran, but writing in Arabic, d. 923) introduces his section on the Roman emperors with a biographical profile of Jesus: some pertinent observations are in Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 112–133.

⁹ See for instance *Murūj al-dhahab*, 2:293–355, it is probably the Muslim historical work best informed on Western history. See also De Simone and Mandalà, *L’immagine araba di Roma*, 25–42; Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 107–142.

¹⁰ Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a’lāq al-naḥḥa*, 128.

since for them he holds the rank of the *imām*. [...] nobody among them can contradict him.”¹¹

However, in all of the texts the central role of Constantine is clear. Constantine was the emperor about whom the greatest number of reports was written, including commonly known legendary episodes. Whether treated with hostility or with admiration, Constantine was acknowledged as the political mind behind the transformation of the Roman Empire into a Christian Empire that had become the real antagonist, as well as the mirror, of the Caliphate. Moreover, he was the founder of Constantinople, the new capital that, for Muslim travellers and scholars, was, inevitably, a partially transparent barrier to observing the city of Rome, resulting in the descriptive overlaps we will consider below.¹²

As we have already observed, most of the information about the city itself seems to be the result of literary transmission more than of direct observation: partly from Byzantine works of history or geography (often through a Syriac filter), but also from Latin works, especially for the Western tradition of Arabic literature (in Maghreb and Andalus), as is the case in the important role played by the Arabic version of Orosius' *Historiae adversus paganos*.¹³ In the development of the textual web, we can glimpse a process that draws closer to the socio-political and architectural reality of Rome. In particular, when we move away from the main core of the historical and geographical traditions of the Arabic *Mashriq* ('the orient'), and we follow the literary route of the *Maghrib*, the Arabic west of Africa and Al-Andalus, which avoided the Byzantine barrier, observers seemed to have had, if not direct contact with Rome itself, at least access to sources that were closer to the object. But this did not prevent the ancient literary traditions from enduring, and many philological problems remain. The

¹¹ Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 2:867.

¹² See for instance Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 2:311-320; *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, 137-145; ʿIzz al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī Ibn al-Athīr, *Ibn-el-Athīr. Kitāb al-kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, ed. Carl Johan Tornberg, 14 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1867-1876), 1:235 (the latter is from the twelfth-thirteenth century). On Constantine in the Islamic sources see Vincenzo Poggi, "Costantino nella polemica islamica," in *Costantino il Grande dall'antichità all'umanesimo*, eds. Giorgio Bonamente and Franca Fusco, 2 vols. (Macerata: Università degli Studi, 1993), 2:823-834; Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 107-142.

¹³ See Levi Della Vida, "La traduzione araba delle storie di Orosio," Mayte Penelas, ed., *Kitāb Hurūshiyūs: Traducción árabe de las Historiae adversus paganos de Orosio* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas: Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, 2001); Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 143-189: including further bibliography.

denomination *Rūmiya* that we find in the oriental texts is considered to be tied to the Greek name *Rōmē*, while the denomination *Rūma* in some occidental sources (but not in all of them) derives most probably from the Latin term *Roma*.¹⁴

However, it is interesting to note that, among the few eye-witnesses to whom direct reports are attributed—both when they correspond to reality, and when they constitute a literary device—we find either the Jew, the merchant, or the monk.¹⁵ These are, in other words, the three classes of individuals who could cross the threshold between the two state and religious entities of Christianity and Islam most easily, and could carry descriptions and information. Furthermore we must add the ambiguous figure of Hārūn ibn Yaḥyā. According to most scholars, Hārūn was a Syrian, and a Christian, who was taken prisoner by the Byzantines and brought to Constantinople. Released by the authorities, possibly on account of his religious faith, he had the opportunity to visit the city, and left one of the most thorough accounts of the Christian capital produced by foreign visitors in the Middle Ages (the disputed date of his presence in the city is around year 900). Afterwards, he moved from Constantinople, following the route of the Via Egnatia to Venice and then Rome, although it is unclear whether he travelled as a pilgrim or not. He also left a description of the first Christian capital, Old Rome, although less detailed than that of Constantinople. Hārūn's account of both Constantinople and Rome, and of the itinerary he followed, has not survived as an independent text, but it was consulted and quoted extensively by more than one author, and is particularly relevant to our theme.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Samir, "Les confusions entre les deux Rome," 95-96, and Di Branco, "Roma o Costantinopoli?," 181-187, where another hypothesis is formulated concerning the reading *Rūmiyya* (with double y) of the oriental transcription. Different suggestions concerning the origin of these denominations are offered by Piemontese, "Roma nella cosmografia persiana medioevale," 499. An excellent first survey of the Arabic sources for Roman history can be found in Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 15-36, while many descriptions of the city of Rome are discussed in De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*.

¹⁵ The first scholar to suggest this was Guidi, "La descrizione di Roma," 212.

¹⁶ More or less complete quotations of Hārūn's travel diary are, for instance, in the Arabic geography by Ibn Rusta (beginning of the tenth century), the Arabic treatise on the *qibla* by Ibn al-Qāṣṣ (tenth century), the anonymous Persian history *Mujmal al-tawārikh wa-l-qīṣaṣ* (twelfth century). On Hārūn, mentioned in almost all the essays in no. 4, see Josef Marquart, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge. Ethnologische und historisch-topographische Studien zur Geschichte des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts (ca. 840-940)* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, T. Weicher, 1903), 260-270; Willy Lüdtke, "Der

Mirabilia

It has been difficult for scholars to untangle and decypher the kaleidoscope of wonders that emerges from a comparative reading of all these inter-related Arabic and Persian descriptions of the city of Rome, that center around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A characteristic element is the overlap in Rome of features that are doubtless characteristics of Constantinople—the New Rome—withstanding that the latter city was often given a separate section in the Arabic geographical encyclopaedias, under the entry *Qusṭanṭīniyya*.¹⁷ This is especially the case in the descriptions from the oriental side of the Islamic world, but also in some of the occidental ones.¹⁸ Beyond the obvious ideological overlap of the two Christian capitals in the eyes of Muslim observers, Constantinople's possible alternative denomination as Rūmiyya (with the double 'y', instead of only one: thus not a name's transcription, but an adjective)¹⁹ could be the basis for the subsequent confusion between the two Christian capitals:²⁰ another sign of the literary nature of the transmission.

Bericht des Hārūn ben Jahja über Rom," *Mitteilungen des kaiserlich deutschen archaeologischen Instituts Römische Abteilung* 19 (1904): 132-141; Alexander A. Vasiliev, "Harun-ibn-Yahya and his Description of Constantinople," *Seminarium Kondakovianum. Recueil d'Etudes archéologiques. Histoires de l'Art. Etudes Byzantines* 5 (1932): 149-163; Georg Ostrogorsky, "Zum Reisebericht des Harun-bin-Jahja," *Seminarium Kondakovianum. Recueil d'Etudes archéologiques. Histoires de l'Art. Etudes Byzantines* 5 (1932): 251-257; Henri Grégoire, "Un captif arabe à la cour de l'Empereur Alexander," *Byzantion* 7 (1932), 666-673; Mehmed Izeddin with P. Therriat, "Un prisonnier arabe à Byzance au IX^e siècle: Hārūn ibn Yahyā," *Revue des études islamiques* 15 (1941-1946): 41-62; Jean-Charles Ducène, "Une deuxième version de la relation d'Hārūn ibn Yahyā sur Constantinople," *Der Islam* 82 (2005): 241-255.

¹⁷ On Constantinople in Islamic literature, see Giorgio Levi Della Vida, "Costantinopoli nella tradizione islamica," *Rendiconti delle Adunanze Solenni dell'Accademia dei Lincei* 5 (1953): 364-373; Mehmed Izeddin, "Quelques voyageurs musulmans à Constantinople au Moyen Âge," *Orient* 34 (1965): 75-106; Miquel, *La géographie humaine*, 381-481; Albrecht Berger, "Sightseeing in Constantinople: Arab travellers, c. 900-1300," in *Travel in the Byzantine world. Papers from the thirty-fourth spring Symposium of Byzantine studies (Birmingham, April 2000)*, ed. Ruth Macrides (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 179-191; Nadia-Maria El Cheikh, *Byzantium viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ General discussions of this overlap are in Samir, "Les confusions entre les deux Rome;" De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*.

¹⁹ Meaning 'Roman', that is the city of the Rūm, 'the Romans', as the Byzantines used to call themselves.

²⁰ This is the hypothesis developed by Marco Di Branco, "Roma o Costantinopoli?," 181-187 and Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 223-230, and related to the most

Some of the features attributed to the city of Rūmi(y)ya can only be ascribed to the new capital on the Bosphorus: first, that it was flanked on three sides by the sea and surrounded by a double wall enclosure, in the middle of which flowed a canal, called—according to a recent reading—*Qusṭanṭīnūs*.²¹ Many other accounts—included in some of the occidental sources—can be traced to their Constantinopolitan origins, as Samir, among others, has correctly shown.²² This does not negate some remarkable characteristics that can be attributed with certainty to Rome. For instance, in the important account by Ibn Rusta (*Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥṣa*, “Book of precious gems,” tenth century), whose first section is based on Hārūn’s report, we read about the presence of the Pope, as well as the distance of Rome from the sea to the west, features of the city’s river, and other details.²³ A few relevant data are provided especially by one of the most detailed occidental sources, the *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (“Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms”) by the Andalusian al-Bakrī (eleventh century). In this text, apparently dependent on Latin sources, the fortress that “has never been conquered by any enemy” should be identified as the Capitoline Hill, for whose name <*munt’rqūt*> a derivation from the Latin *mons arcis* may be suggested.²⁴ Furthermore, in the creation of a new city beyond the river, set opposite the *rūma bākīya* (a possible

ancient geographical description of *Rūmiyya* by Ibn Khurradādhbih (Persian Arabograph of the ninth century). According to Di Branco, this description should refer to Constantinople, and it might have affected many subsequent accounts of Rome; see Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 113-6. On the multifaceted value of the term Rūm, see below.

²¹ See Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 113. These features are diffused in many of the accounts, starting in the oriental tradition with Ibn Khurradādhbih, and discernable also in some of the occidental sources (see for instance Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥṣa*, 130; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 2:868-869; al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-mushtaq*, 751). In some cases a section with this *incipit* is juxtaposed with another one that shows proper ‘Roman’ characters. For the reading of the canal’s name, see De Simone and Mandalà, *L’immagine araba di Roma*, 36, no. 69; Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 163-165.

²² Samir, “Les confusions entre les deux Rome.”

²³ Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥṣa*, 128-130.

²⁴ See al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 1:477-478; Nallino, “‘Mirabilia’ di Roma,” 882, where reference is made to the later al-Ḥimyarī (from Maghreb, thirteenth-fourteenth century; the Arabic text is in Nallino, “Un’inedita descrizione araba di Roma,” 298-302, at 299), who follows al-Bakrī; De Simone and Mandalà, *L’immagine araba di Roma*, 37, 84. A suggestion indicating the association of the Latin words *mons* and *arx* with the Arabic transcription *munt’rqūt* is already present in Scarcia, “Roma vista dagli Arabi,” 157.

transcription of *Roma vecchia*), 'Old Rome,' one can see a depiction of the *civitas leonina*, or perhaps more probably of the slightly later Giovannipoli (or even more likely of both), if the 'bishop' to whom the construction is attributed is *Yuwānīsh*, identifiable as Pope John VII.²⁵ There is even a reference to the *Mons Gaudii* (*jabal ghawdhīh*), 'Mount of Joy'; that is, Monte Mario, at the end of the Via Francigena, where pilgrims were able to glimpse the Basilica of St. Peter for the first time.²⁶

Still, the list of unresolved questions is long. Problems of reconstruction include the presence of an important church dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul (Ibn Khurradādhbih, Ibn Rusta, Yāqūt, al-Idrīsī) located above the tombs of both saints: occasionally it is divided into two churches, dedicated to each saint respectively. Is this an unexpected overlap of the two Roman patriarchal churches, or the ennobling of the church of the same name in Constantinople? And what conclusions can we reach about the huge church that is usually the most thoroughly described (and sometimes associated with the King's Palace), and referred to as the Church of the Nations (*Kanīsat al-umam*, Yāqūt, a term that corresponds to *Ecclesia Universalis*, the title of St. John Lateran), the Church of the King (ar. *Kanīsat al-malik*, in Yāqūt, pers. *Kanīsa-yi malik*, in Hamadānī), or the Church of Sion (*Kanīsat Šihyūn*, Ibn Khurradādhbih, Yāqūt)? Putting aside for the moment the detailed descriptions of doors, columns, lamps, statues, altars, etc., this latter name deserves further attention. On the one hand, it has been supposed that it may correspond to the Church of Hagia Sofia, in Constantinople, one of whose titles was in fact New Sion.²⁷ On the other hand, the comparison with the *Ecclesia Sion* in Jerusalem (as the Church

²⁵ See al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 1:478; De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*, 29-30, 84. Since the transcription in al-Ḥimyarī is slightly different (*rūma bāliya*, cfr. Nallino, "Un'inedita descrizione araba di Roma," 299, and 304, no. 32), Samir hypothesizes that the name was modelled on the Greek: *Rōmē palaia*, 'Old Rome' (Samir, "Les confusions entre les deux Rome," 97). The older reading by al-Bakrī and the Romance context make the other derivation more plausible: see, De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*, 29, no. 31, and Scarcia, "Roma vista dagli Arabi," 158-159.

²⁶ See al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 1:477; Nallino, "Un'inedita descrizione araba di Roma," 299, 303; the reading as *Mons Gaudii* is suggested in De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*, 42, 84. Different interpretations can be found in Nallino, "Un'inedita descrizione araba di Roma," 303, no. 22, and in Scarcia, "Roma vista dagli Arabi," 156.

²⁷ Gilbert Dagron, *Constantinople imaginaire. Etudes sur les recueil des Patria* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1984), 300-5; De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*, 53-55; Di Branco, "Roma o Costantinopoli?," 184.

of the Apostles, in the south-west of the city, was called in many medieval *Itineraria*), could also point to the Roman basilica of St. John Lateran, founded by Constantine, as suggested by Guidi, on the basis of an explicit reference in a later anonymous Arabic geographical text.²⁸ In the same way, considering the name *Siḥyūn* as an implicit link between the Lateran church and the Temple of Jerusalem should not be viewed as groundless. In the introductory section of his long account on Rome, the geographer Yāqūt relates that, according to Ibn ‘Abbās (cousin and companion to the Prophet, and one of the first and most authoritative transmitters of traditions), “the holy furnishings of the Jerusalem Temple had descended from Paradise. The Rūm took them and carried them away, to one of their cities called Rūmiya.” A passage about Rūmiya from the above mentioned Arabic anonymous geographical text observes, “In this city there is a source from which three hundred and sixty rivers flow [...]. The water from this source comes from beneath the king’s palace and in it are hidden the keys to the Temple, the Prophet Moses’ rod, the relics of the Tablets of Law and the Ark of the Covenant: all that is beneath the stair to the east.”²⁹ It is clear that there is a connection with the tradition, reported in ancient epigraphs and spread through medieval Christian literature—and discussed elsewhere in this volume—that beneath the high altar of the Lateran church were precious Temple relics.³⁰ It is also worth noting that the

²⁸ See Guidi, “La descrizione di Roma,” *passim*; it is a late Christian Arabic text, preserved in at least two manuscripts: no. 755 (3) in Leiden University Library, transcribed and translated in Carlo Crispo Moncada, *La descrizione di Roma nel secolo XII d’Abū Ḥamid da Granata tolta da un codice arabo della Biblioteca Nazionale di Palermo* (Palermo: Stabilimento Tipografico Virzì, 1906), 29–40; and the Vat. Ar. 286 from the Vatican Library, often used by Guidi in his essay and translated into French in Olga de Lébédew, *Codex 286 du Vatican. Récits de voyages d’un Arabe* (St. Petersburg: XIII^{ème} Congrès international des orientalistes, 1902).

²⁹ Ms. Vat. ar. 286, f. 107r (de Lébédew, *Codex 286 du Vatican*, 62); see Guidi, “La descrizione di Roma,” 204–205.

³⁰ For instance in the *Graphia Aureae Urbis Romae*, see Karl Ludwig Urlichs, *Codex Urbis Romae Topographicus* (Würzburg: J. Stahel, 1871), 117. Two other Latin texts from the twelfth century that present the same theme (*De sacra imagine SS. Salvatoris in Palatio Lateranensi* and *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae*) are discussed by Marie Thérèse Champagne, “‘Treasures of the Temple’ and Claims to Authority in Twelfth-Century Rome,” in *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages*, eds. Brenda Bolton and Christine Meek (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 107–108. The same tradition was well known in Jewish literature, see the article by Marie Thérèse Champagne and Ra’anan Boustán in this volume. The entire argument was presented by Guidi, “La descrizione di Roma,” 191–192, 201–205. Guidi reported another Arabic tradition saying that the holy table, descended from the sky,

list of the wonderful furnishings of the Church of the King in Yāqūt's description corresponds closely to those reported in the section related to the life of Pope St. Sylvester in the Roman *Liber Pontificalis*, as Constantine's gift.³¹

Yāqūt locates this church close to the immense 'King's Palace' (*Qaṣr al-malik*), but, although al-Idrīsī specifies that the king of this palace is called *al-bāba*, the Pope, it remains doubtful whether—within the web of these texts considered as a whole—we are dealing with the Patriarch or the Grand Palace in Constantinople, due to the complex blend of other details and the clear process of interpolation of all of the texts (in one passage, Yāqūt calls it *al-balāt*, which was the proper Arabic name used for the Palace of the Byzantine emperors). However, the setting, outside the Palace, of a complex *Salvatio Romae* talisman defending the city seems to drive us back to Rome with certainty. A hundred copper statues, each holding a bell, were standing on a hundred golden columns. Each one represented a people, and the bells would ring when the king of that people planned to attack the city.³² It is the famous Roman device described in most of the Latin *Mirabilia*, and whose oldest reference seems to be found in the Byzantine Cosmas of Jerusalem's commentary on Gregory of

was preserved in the Church of Sion in Jerusalem (Ibn al-Wardī, fourteenth century), see Guidi, "La descrizione di Roma," 192.

³¹ See Guidi, "La descrizione di Roma," 204; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 2:870-871; Louis Duchesne, ed., *Le 'Liber Pontificalis'*, 3 vols. (Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 1955-1957), 1:172-174. The figure of Pope Sylvester I, legendary baptizer of Constantine, appears to have had a significant role in the construction and definition of the figure of Khidr, one of the main saints of Islam, referred to in the Koran and still the object of strong devotion throughout the Islamic world. The textual passage, which was transmitted through Latin-Greek-Armenian-Syriac-Arabic, seems particularly indebted to the course of the *Acta Silvestri*, a text that was already codified in Latin at the end of the fourth century, authoritatively cited in the literature of Symmachus and in the *Liber Pontificalis* (sixth century). The *Acta Silvestri* was translated into Greek, Armenian and Syriac and penetrated into prestigious and well diffused texts such as the Armenian *History of the Armenians* by Mosè of Chorene (probably fifth century), and the Syriac *Omēlie* by Jacob of Sarūgh (d. 521), until it made its way into Arabic literature. On this matter, see Mario Casari, "La Fontana della Vita tra Silvestro e Khizr. Alessandro e Costantino a confronto," in *Medioevo Romanzo e Orientale. Macrotesti fra Oriente e Occidente*, eds. Giovanna Carbonaro et al. (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003), 225-237.

³² See Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 2:871; see also Hamadānī, *'Ajāyibnāma*, 406.

Nazianzus' poems (seventh century).³³ Although most of the sources place the *Salvatio* on the Capitoline Hill, Yāqūt's placement of it outside the presumed Lateran church and Palace—beside the other famous talisman of the copper (or golden) bird³⁴—would seem to match the central role played by the *Campus Lateranensis* in the medieval tradition, also fitting Muslim historians' special attention towards the figure of Constantine and his architectural as well as political inheritance.

Many doubts remain, but it is important to note that in a few cases it seems that we can discern in these texts two clearly different accounts, one of the main description of Constantinople, the other of recognizable traits of Rome.³⁵ These two main reports have converged to different degrees, in some cases remaining simply juxtaposed, while in other cases becoming inextricably merged. Apart from some possible philological considerations, this was probably due to the fact that the two cities, Old and New Rome, taken together, represented the heart of Christianity. It is significant that a detailed Arabic source from the western side of the Mediterranean (the geographical work by the Maghrebi al-Ḥimyarī) reports the following quite accurate list of the Patriarchal sees of Christianity: Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem, rightly identifying the last as the most recent.³⁶ It is unclear whether Constantinople has been forgotten or, rather, blended together with the 'other' Rome.

The Labyrinth

This brings us to the actual labyrinth that was our starting point. An anonymous Persian cosmography and universal history, the *Mujmal al-tawārikh*

³³ Arturo Graf, *Roma nella memoria e nelle immaginazioni del Medio Evo*, 2 vols. (Turin: Loescher, 1882-1883), 1:182-213; Giuseppe Lozza, *Cosma di Gerusalemme. Commentario ai Carmi di Gregorio Nazianzeno* (Naples: D'Auria, 2000); Cristina Nardella, *Il fascino di Roma nel Medioevo. Le "Meraviglie di Roma" di mastro Gregorio* (Rome: Viella, 2007), 64-68, 160-163.

³⁴ For this and the related bibliography, see Miquel, *La géographie humaine*, 376; De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*, 55-57.

³⁵ The first of these two accounts could be the one derived from the 'voice' of a monk, while the second one represents the account of the 'pilgrim' Hārūn. On the monk (mentioned by Yāqūt and based on Ibn al-Faqīh, ninth-tenth century) and his possible identification, see De Simone and Mandalà, *L'immagine araba di Roma*, 20-21.

³⁶ Nallino, "Un'inedita descrizione araba di Roma," 298, 302; see also, Samir, "Les confusions entre les deux Rome," 105-106.

wa-l-qīṣaṣ ("Collection of Chronicles and Stories," 1126), was the result of the consultation of ancient sources and of the personal travel experiences of the author. In the geographical section, there is a description, with correct place names, of the tracks of the Via Egnatia that linked Constantinople with the Adriatic in the Middle Ages and from there moved on to Rome. The description is based on the report of the supposed pilgrim mentioned previously, Hārūn ibn Yaḥyā.³⁷ The account of Rome is brief but full of meaning: "The wall and the bastion of the city of Rome constitute a collection of wonders. They were built intelligently. There are nine surrounding walls, one after another. When a foreigner enters, he is confused when he leaves: wherever he crosses, he finds himself in the centre. This report is famous." A short report on the bird talisman follows. The talisman, together with the basilica that houses it, is considered to be among the four wonders of the world, alongside the lighthouse of Alexandria, the copper horseman in Andalus, and the copper tower in the Land of 'Ād. Introducing a beautifully depicted labyrinth, he adds: "The shape of the walls in Rome follows this fashion" (Fig. 1). At the entrance to the labyrinth is a door, beside which, obliquely, one can read the word *ṭilism*, 'talisman'.³⁸

The text tells us that it is a famous report, but it is not easy to find traces of it. A similar account is found in an Arabic guide for Muslim pilgrims produced shortly thereafter, the work of al-Harawī (m. 1215), *Kitāb al-ishārāt ilā ma'rifat al-ziyārāt* ("Guide of pilgrimage sites"). The tone, however, is completely different. In the section devoted to the northern side of the Mediterranean, after a short presentation of some wonderful features of the city of Rome, we read: "as for the rumor it has seven surrounding walls, arranged in such a way that whoever enters cannot leave, this has no foundation nor truth; there we find only a prison built as a

³⁷ Bahār et al., eds., *Mujmal al-tawārikh wa-l-qīṣaṣ*, 487-489; the different stages on the pilgrims' route can be read as referring to Salonika, Beroia (or Brucida) and Split. Compare with Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥīya*, 126-128, and see Piemontese, "Roma nella cosmografia persiana medioevale," 507-8; Ducène, "Une deuxième version."

³⁸ Bahār et al., *Mujmal al-tawārikh*, 488-489; see Piemontese, "Roma nella cosmografia persiana medioevale," 507-510. Among the manuscripts that present this icon, see: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. Persan 62 (1410 CE), f. 322v; Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, ms. 322, 120r; Istanbul, Mehmet Fuat Köprülü Collection, f. 167v. A facsimile of another manuscript is in İraj Afshār and Maḥmūd Omīdsālār, eds., *Mujmal al-tawārikh wa-l-qīṣaṣ* (Tehran-Indianapolis: Society for Promotion of Persian Culture, 1379Sh/2000).



Figure 1. *Mujmal al-tawāriḥ wa-l-qīṣaṣ* (1126). Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Pers. 62 (1410), f. 322v. This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed via <http://www.brill.nl/me>

spiral, in such a way that the prisoner cannot escape; and here is a drawing of it."³⁹

Indeed, the presence of a few representations and descriptions of labyrinths in medieval Arabic and Persian literature has aroused the curiosity of some scholars.⁴⁰ In analysing its main features, Alessandro Bausani has observed that the archetypal symbol of the labyrinth should be considered as extraneous to the theological fundamentals of Islam; indeed, neither the Arabic nor the Persian scholars of the classical era have a precise term for "labyrinth."⁴¹ Thus, we are led to reflect that the representations of the labyrinth that we can find within the Islamic environment are the fruit of the acculturation of objects originating from different textual and iconographic contexts. In addition, it is interesting to note, too, that almost all of the labyrinth representations found so far in Arabic and Persian texts are, in some way, related to the city of Rome (or Constantinople, as we will see in due course).⁴²

³⁹ Al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-ishārāt*, 57. The same report was taken up by the fourteenth-century Arabic cosmographer al-Dimashqī: Shams al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Dimashqī, *Nukhbat al-dahr fi 'ajā'ib al-barr wa-l-baḥr*, ed. August Ferdinand Mehren (St. Petersburg: Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1865-1866), 227.

⁴⁰ Specific observations are in Umberto Scerrato, "Labyrinths in the wooden mosques of North Pakistan. A problematic presence," *East and West* 33, 1-4 (1983): 21-9; Alessandro Bausani, "Islamic Culture and a possible astronomical interpretation of the Labyrinth: Some Notes," *Hamdard Islamicus* 2, 4 (Winter 1984): 17-24; Alessandro Bausani, "La cultura islamica e una possibile interpretazione astronomica del labirinto," in *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae dicata*, eds. Gherardo Gnoli and Lionello Lanciotti, 3 vols. (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1985), 1:57-63; Angelo Arioli, "Labirinti islamici: ricognizioni letterarie," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 68 (1994): 233-247; Arioli *Le città mirabili*; Mario Casari, "Il labirinto romeo: un'ipotesi di traslazione," in *Scritti in onore di Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti*, eds. Daniela Bredi, Leonardo Capezzone, Wasim Dahmash, and Lucia Rostagno, 3 vols. (Rome: Edizioni Q, 2008), 1:355-369; Mandalà, "Roma e il labirinto." References can be found also in general works on the labyrinth: in particular, Paolo Santarcangeli, *Il libro dei labirinti. Storia di un mito e di un simbolo* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1967), 179-185; Hermann Kern, *Labyrinthe. Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen 5000 Jahre Gegenwart eines Urbilds* (Munich: Prestel, 1982), 166, 425, and *passim*.

⁴¹ See Bausani, "Islamic Culture and a possible astronomical interpretation;" Bausani, "La cultura islamica e una possibile interpretazione astronomica."

⁴² There are a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century labyrinths carved in the prayer rooms of some Islamic mosques in northern Pakistan (Scerrato, "Labyrinths in the wooden mosques"). Literary descriptions of labyrinthine places are listed in Arioli, "Labirinti islamici," 233-247; however, these descriptions (and the term *multawī* which denotes them) seem to be traceable to the ancient figurative value of the concept (in use since late

A third labyrinth has been given extensive attention recently by Giuseppe Mandalà in an excellent study:⁴³ this image is included in the work of Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad ibn Abī Aḥmad ibn al-Qāṣṣ (d. between 946-948), *Kitāb dalā’il al-qibla*, “Book for the orientation of the qibla,” written for the benefit of travellers and pilgrims.⁴⁴ It is the oldest known representation of Rome as a labyrinth in Arabic literature. Following Mandalà’s edition of the passage, on the description of Rūmiyya we read: “Its walls are most extraordinary: there are ten walls, one after the other; when a foreigner enters and walks along the space between the walls, until he gets near the city, it seems as if they are spinning around him, so he wants to leave but he gets confused and then might get lost, when he try to return from a place that he does not know; I have drawn their image”. The text is almost identical to the Persian version of the *Mujmal al-tawārikh wa-l-qīṣaṣ*, and in both cases the labyrinth is linked to the account of Hārūn ibn Yahyā.⁴⁵

The identification of the topographical concept underlying these references is also complicated by the presence of a second tradition that identifies this characteristic of multiple walls, not with Rome, but with Constantinople, the second Rome. The description given by the Persian cosmographer al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283), who wrote in Arabic, has been known for some time. In the entry on *Qusṭantīniyya* (Constantinople) of his *Kitāb āthār al-bilād*, “Book of the Monuments of the Countries,” he presents the

antiquity) which refers more properly to the ‘maze,’ a tortuous structure where different choices lead to different paths, some of them blind. This is substantially different than the graphic representation of unicursal labyrinths which were the only depicted labyrinths before the Renaissance: in these labyrinths (including the celebrated Knossos ‘palace’ and the Islamic representations we are considering) there is no possibility of going astray, and only one way to follow, which eventually coincides with the ‘thread of Ariadne itself’ (see Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 13-42).

⁴³ Mandalà, “Roma e il labirinto,” 220-222.

⁴⁴ On this Shafī’i jurist and his geographical work, see Jean-Charles Ducène, “Le *Kitāb dalā’il al-qibla* d’Ibn al-Qāṣṣ : analyse des trois manuscrits et des emprunts d’Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 14 (2001): 169-187; and Ducène, “Une deuxième version.” A facsimile of one of the five manuscripts (preserved in Cairo, Dār al-kutub) was published by Sezgin, “*Kitāb dalā’il al-qibla* li-Ibn al-Qāṣṣ,” 7-92; a facsimile of a second shorter version of the same work (preserved in Istanbul, Beyazit Kütüphanesi) is in Fuat Sezgin, “‘*Kitāb dalā’il al-qibla*’ li-Ibn al-Qāṣṣ. Ar-riwāya at-tāniya (Das Buch über die Orientierung nach Mekka von Ibn al-Qāṣṣ. Zweite Version),” *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 5 (1989): 7-62.

⁴⁵ The labyrinth is not included in what seems to be the longest report of Hārūn’s account, as reported by Ibn Rusta; see Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a’lāq al-naḥīya*, 126-132.

city in the figure of a labyrinth, followed by a short note: "Now it no longer has this shape, yet it is still a powerful city."⁴⁶ A second Constantinopolitan labyrinth in Arabic, also brought to light by Mandalà, is part of a late geographical work, the *Kitāb al-bustān fī 'ajā'ib al-arḍ wa-l-buldān*, "Book of the Garden on the Wonders of the Earth and the Countries," by Salāmish ibn Kundughdī al-Ṣāliḥī (possibly a *qadi* from Damascus, d. ca. 1538-1539). Following the same typological tradition as al-Harawī, the labyrinth does not correspond to the walls of the city, but to a prison: "There is an extraordinary jail in this city, and whoever enters it, will never be able to get out. It has the shape of a snail, and whoever wants to leave, goes around, returning to the beginning; this is its shape."⁴⁷

We see quite clearly that the texts accompanying these five manuscript depictions of the labyrinth are closely entwined via a relationship that is difficult to disentangle, and involves reciprocal borrowing, interpolation and variation. It has been suggested that the city to which Arab and Persian authors were referring originally was Constantinople. Notations on the particular shape of the walls of Constantinople recur in Arabic literature, perhaps connected with a widespread preoccupation with the city's defence system: the impenetrable walls of this closest and best known Christian capital remained the objective of successive Muslim armies for centuries, unbreached until 1452.⁴⁸ The labyrinthine representation of these walls should be connected, then, to the parallel tradition concerning Jericho. In a number of medieval Greek, Latin, Armenian, Syriac and Jewish manuscripts (from the ninth to the nineteenth century) the city of Jericho was often represented as being set in a labyrinth (whose spirals are thus not the walls of the city, but a winding road that leads to it). The association of the city of Jericho with the labyrinth is the result of an elaboration of the well-known biblical account of its conquest by Joshua's

⁴⁶ Zakariyyā' b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd Abū Yahyā al-Qazwīnī, *Kosmographie (Kitāb āthār al-bilād; Kitāb 'ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt)*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1848-1849), 2:406.

⁴⁷ See Mandalà, "Roma e il labirinto," 225-227, 232-234. On this geographical work, see also Jean-Charles Ducène, "Le *Hortus rerum mirabilium* (Rome 1584-1585): une cosmographie arabe oubliée," *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 156 (2006): 81-93.

⁴⁸ Mandalà mentions an interesting text by al-Zuhri (Andalusian geographer from the twelfth century), where a description is given of the labyrinthine character of Constantinople's walls; see Mohammed Hadj-Sadok, ed., "al-Zuhri, *Kitāb al-dja'āfiyya*," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 21 (1968): 7-312, at 233-234; Mandalà, "Roma e il labirinto," 228-229.

army after having circled it seven times.⁴⁹ According to this interpretation, the biblical conquest of Jericho would have represented an historical and iconographic model that these Muslim authors relocated to their main military target, the Christian capital of the Byzantine Empire.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the preference shown by some authors for the idea that the 'Roman' labyrinth represented a prison, rather than the walls of the city, would seem to point to an allusion to an infamous Constantinopolitan jail, well-known to many Arab geographers and historians, and possibly identifiable as the *Praetorium*. The constant overlap between the two Christian capitals would have provided the general frame for this textual and iconographic development.

These considerations may help us understand the way our authors tried to deal with this image of the labyrinth when they encountered it in their sources. Employing a rational approach, they might have tended to historicize this icon (either as winding walls or as a prison from which it was impossible to flee), while at the same time retaining the representation at the level of an *exemplum* related to 'Roman' strength and power. Whatever the case, the question of this Roman labyrinth's deepest origins requires further attention.

We should return to Old Rome in order to decode this image, on the basis of several textual considerations. Although we have seen a number of evidently Constantinopolitan details wrongly attributed to Rome in the Arabic and Persian descriptions of the city, other data clearly have been proven to be Roman; in particular it seems that we can trust at least the basic structure of Hārūn's account (from the ninth/tenth century, and providing the basis for the two oldest extant representations of the Roman labyrinth-walls, in the work of Ibn al-Qāṣṣ, tenth century, and in the Persian anonymous historical text, twelfth century), since it provides the correct route of the Via Egnatia from Constantinople to Rome, and a number

⁴⁹ See Wolfgang Haubrichs, "Error inextricabilis: Form und Funktion der Labyrinthabbildung in mittelalterlichen Handschriften," in *Text und Bild: Aspekte des Zusammenwirkens zweier Künste in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, eds. Christel Meier and Uwe Ruberg (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1980), 63-174; Kern, *Labyrinth*, 182-198; Penelope Reed Doob, *The idea of the labyrinth from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 133-148, 341-342.

⁵⁰ This idea is the basis for Mandalà's accurate reconstruction in Mandalà, "Roma e il labirinto."

of accurate Roman features.⁵¹ Also, the explicit assignation of the labyrinth as an image for Constantinople is from a later date (thirteenth century in al-Qazwīnī, and sixteenth century in al-Šāliḥī). We can add that the interpretations' ambiguity, which viewed the labyrinth variously as a map of the walls or as a jail, implies an unstable transmission, making the association with the Jericho tradition only partially meaningful. Finally, in none of the texts considered is there any allusion to the desire to attack the city walls: rather a sense of wonder and admiration pervades the lines devoted to the labyrinth where we read of a 'foreigner' (*gharīb*) who enters the city and tries—without success—to go out, rather than of an aggressor who wants to conquer it.

Hermann Kern has established a number of foundational concepts concerning the birth and development of the labyrinth symbol.⁵² Besides the well-known tradition relating to the palace of Knossos on Crete, which is the oldest building referred to as a labyrinth in literature and archaeological evidence, the archetypal labyrinth seems to have been connected to a propitiatory dance performed by a group of young men and women who move along spiralling routes according to a specific liturgical sequence. The association of the labyrinth with the dance is already present in Homer (*Iliad*, 18, 590-605), but the earliest visual proof of its choreographic function appears on an Etruscan pitcher (ca. 620 BC), where it is labelled *Truia*, a word alluding to the city of Troy, but also, in the Etruscan language, bearing the meaning of 'circle', 'circus', 'arena'.⁵³ The 'game of Troy' (*Lusus Troiae*) entered Roman civic life and was established in the time of Augustus as an important part of the imperial ceremonial. And it is under Augustus that the clearest description of this dance is given by Virgil who ascribes it to a ceremony led by Ascanius, Aeneas' son, after

⁵¹ Reported in the first part of Ibn Rusta's account: Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-ā'lāq al-naḥḥa*, 126-130.

⁵² Again, this needs to be distinguished from the "maze." Kern, *Labyrinthe* is an exceptional catalogue and reflection on all the aspects and typologies of the theme; the English edition, Hermann Kern, *Through the Labyrinth. Designs and Meanings over 5000 Years* (Munich: Prestel, 2000), includes a few *addenda* at the end of each chapter and an updated bibliography.

⁵³ See Adolfo Zavaroni, *I documenti etruschi* (Padua: Sherpa, 1996), 319-321. On the *Truia* labyrinth, see also John L. Heller and Stewart S. Cairns, "To Draw a Labyrinth," in *Classical Studies Presented to Ben Edwin Perry by His Students and Colleagues at the University of Illinois, 1924-60* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 236-262; Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 99-111.

disembarking on Italian soil on their flight from burning Troy. After the thorough description of the dancers' movements, he states:

Hunc morem cursus atque haec certamina primus
 Ascanius, Longam muris cum cingeret Albam,
 Rettulit et priscos docuit celebrare Latinos,
 Quo puer ipse modo, secum quo Troia pubes;
 Albani docuere suos; hinc maxima porro
 Accepit Roma et patrium seruauit honorem;
 Troiaque nunc pueri, Troianum dicitur agmen.
 Hac celebrata tenus sancto certamina patri.⁵⁴

The labyrinth dance, thus, is associated with the foundation of cities, in particular Albalonga and its most precious 'daughter,' Rome.

Notwithstanding the many difficulties in ascertaining the different aspects and values of the labyrinth symbol, Kern believes that this concept of the city-founding, apotropaic Game of Troy is at the origin of the great diffusion of mosaic labyrinths in Roman culture: datable between the second century BCE and the fifth century CE, they were spread across a vast area of the Empire, which included North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, Gaul, Great Britain, and even Cyprus. The center of these mosaic labyrinths often was occupied by a representation of the Minotaur's tale, sometimes of Theseus only, or of Ariadne, or of both. However, in other cases the center was left blank, or was filled with different motifs or objects, like floral decorations, weapons, and even a house. The labyrinth mosaic in Ostia has at its center the representation of a lighthouse, possibly the one in Ostia's harbor.⁵⁵ The most relevant feature of these mosaics is that we are faced here with the first explicit representation of the labyrinth surrounded by walls and entrance doors: the aspect is unmistakably that of a city. These mosaics, "exclusively a Roman phenomenon,"⁵⁶ were often

⁵⁴ The whole passage is in *Aeneid*, V, 596-603. "This game and mode of march Ascanius, / when Alba Longa's bastions proudly rose, / taught to the Latin people of the prime; / and as the princely Trojan and his train / were wont to do, so Alba to her sons / the custom gave; so glorious Rome at last / the heritage accepted and revered; / and still we know them for the 'Trojan Band,' / and call the lads a 'Troy.' Such was the end / of game and contest at Anchises' grave," transl. by Theodore C. Williams, *The Aeneid of Virgil* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 168.

⁵⁵ Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 113-138; Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 84-103.

⁵⁶ Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 113, Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 85; on the mosaic labyrinths and their interpretation see also Erwan Marec, "Le thème du Labyrinthe et du Minotaure dans

placed near the entrances of houses to ward off evil. Most of these mosaic labyrinths are divided into quadrants. Kern believes that this particular shape is connected with the foundation of Rome and its primitive form, the so-called *Roma quadrata*. The precise meaning of this term is still the subject of debate, but should probably be translated as, "Rome divided into four sections" (Figs 2 and 3).⁵⁷ Kern emphasizes that the presence of Theseus refers to his role as re-founder of a city (Athens), and so is associated with Romulus in Plutarch's *Vitae Parallelae*.⁵⁸ It seems difficult to separate the later appearance of labyrinthine representations of Rome from such a powerful literary and iconographic tradition.

Following the affirmation of Christianity, some of these mosaics moved from Roman houses to churches, progressively acquiring new meaning. Two Roman mosaic labyrinths show this transition quite clearly. A square labyrinth from the Basilica of Reparata, founded in 324 CE in Al-Asnam, Orléansville (Algeria), bears in its center a square group of letters, 13 rows across and 13 down, where the expression SANCTA ECCLESIA can be read in all directions.⁵⁹ A second square labyrinth in Tizirt's Christian Basilica

la mosaïque romaine : Les Nouvelles Mosaïques d'Hippone, de Dellys et de Cherchel," in *Hommages à Albert Grenier* (Coll. Latomus, LVIII) ed. Marcel Renard, 3 vols., (Bruxelles: Latomus-Revue d'Études Latines, 1962), 3:1094-1112; Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski, *La Mosaïque de Thésée: Etudes sur les mosaïques avec représentations du labyrinthe, de Thésée et du Minotaure* (Warsaw: Editions Scientifiques de Pologne, 1977); John Kraft, "The Cretan Labyrinth and the Walls of Troy: an Analysis of Roman Labyrinth Designs," *Opuscula Romana* 15, 6 (1985): 79-86; Gianna Dareggi, "I mosaici con raffigurazione del labirinto: una variazione sul tema del 'centro'," *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Antiquité* 104 (1992): 281-292.

⁵⁷ See Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 113-114; Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 85. On the *Roma quadrata*, see Ádám Szabó, "Roma Quadrata," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 87 (1938): 160-169; an updated discussion of the *status quaestionis* is in Claudia Cecamore, *Palatium. Topografia storica del Palatino tra III sec. a.C. e I sec. d.C.* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), 15-54. The majority of the Roman mosaic labyrinths are square and few are round.

⁵⁸ See Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 114; Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 85. Kern believes that Plutarch's account of the foundation of Rome, achieved by Romulus with the liturgical help of Etrurian priests, contains an implicit reference to the Game of Troy (Plutarch, *Romulus*, 11, 1-5); see Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 99-111.

⁵⁹ See François Prévost, "Notice sur le labyrinthe de l'église de Reparatus," *Revue Archéologique* 8 (1851-1852): 566-571; William H. Matthews, *Mazes and Labyrinths. A general account of their history and development* (London: Longmans-Green, 1922), 54-5; Daszewski, *La Mosaïque de Thésée*, no. 4, Pl. 57; Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 119, and the attendant bibliography.



Figure 2. Fribourg, Switzerland. Miséricorde Building, University of Fribourg. Mosaic from a Roman villa in Cormérod (200-225 ca). Courtesy of the University of Fribourg. This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed via <http://www.brill.nl/me>

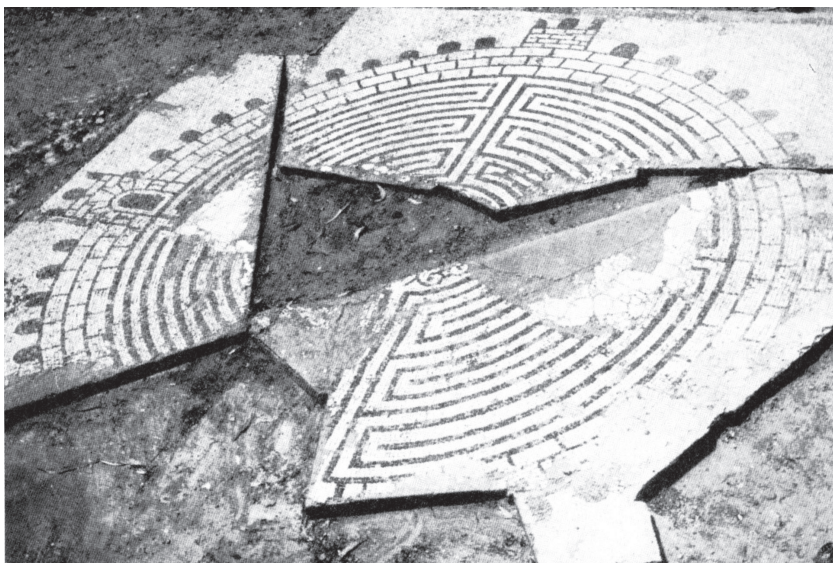


Figure 3. El Djem, Tunisia. Mosaic from a Roman house in ancient Thysdrus (175-225 ca). From Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski, *La Mosaïque de Thésée: Etudes sur les mosaïques avec représentations du labyrinthe, de Thésée et du Minotaure*. Warsaw: Editions Scientifiques de Pologne, 1977: Pl. 54b.

(Algeria), dating from 450 CE and unfortunately destroyed, also shows traces of this transformation in the heavily damaged inscription that was adjacent to the labyrinth.⁶⁰ In general, the emergence of Christian culture heralds a new interpretation of the conceptual and visual features of the labyrinth. In some ancient churches we find labyrinths connected with the passages from the legend of the Minotaur, functioning as a warning. In Christian contexts, the labyrinth quickly assumed the broader meaning of representing the tortuous path through this life, wide at its entrance and narrow at the exit, so that he who is caught up in the joys of life and weighed down by vices, will find it difficult to regain true life (Piacenza, San Savino Church, 903 CE). Progressively, the labyrinth has served as a symbolic route for prayer and metaphor for pilgrimage from Late Antiquity.⁶¹ Large floor labyrinths in some French cathedrals were called

⁶⁰ See Daszewski, *La Mosaïque de Thésée*, no. 6; Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 135-136.

⁶¹ Among the extensive studies on this subject, see especially, Adolphe-Napoleon Didron (Didron aîné), "Essai sur le pavage des églises antérieurement au quinzième siècle," *Annales*

chemin de Jerusalem, and were used as an alternative to the pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Crusades or when the roads were unsafe (for example in the cathedral of Chartres, ca. 1200). Although smaller and at times depicted on the walls, there were numerous examples of these labyrinths in Italian churches, apparently predominant on the pilgrimage road of the Via Francigena. Many no longer exist, however, or are deteriorated and not easy to date: among the Italian examples are the Cathedral of Lucca, the Cathedral of Cremona, San Michele in Pavia, Santa Maria in Trastevere and Santa Maria in Aquiro in Rome (Fig. 4). In fact, the labyrinthine allusion to pilgrimage was not limited to the city of Jerusalem, but soon included Rome.

When dealing with the representations of labyrinths in Arabic and Persian manuscripts, we cannot ignore this double tradition of labyrinths related to the city of Rome (those of the Roman mosaics and of the Christian churches). The direct links are still missing, and further research is required, but this hypothesis may provide some useful directions in our interpretation of those texts and images. First, the Roman mosaics are the most ancient representations of the labyrinth as a city, including the city's walls and gates, which, for example, can be seen in the Parisian manuscript of the Persian *Mujmal*. These mosaics were apotropaic symbols that represented the foundation of the city of Rome and its power. With this function they could find a place within the wondrous reports that were later included in these Arabic and Persian literary accounts. As we have already noted, these texts do not reveal so much a desire for conquest, as much as

Archéologiques par Didron aîné 12 (1852): 137-153; Julien Durand, "Les pavés-mosaïques en Italie et en France. II.—France," *Annales Archéologiques par Didron aîné* 17 (1857): 118-127; Matthews, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, 54-70; Henri Leclercq, "Labyrinthe," in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, 15 vols., eds. Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1907-1953), 8:973-982; Kern, *Labyrinthe*, 206-241; Reed Doob, *The idea of the labyrinth*, 117-133; Paolo Caucci von Saucken, "La francigena e le vie romee," in *Il mondo dei pellegrinaggi. Roma, Santiago, Gerusalemme*, ed. Paolo Caucci von Saucken (Milan: Jaca Book, 1999), 137-186; Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 142-165; Riccardo Capasso, "Itinerari di pellegrini alla volta di Roma fra Tardo Antico ed Altomedioevo," in *Studi sulle società e le culture de Medioevo per Girolamo Arnaldi*, ed. Ludovico Gatto and Paola Supino Martini, 2 vols. (Florence: All'Insegna del Giglio, 2002), 2:91-104; Giorgio Massola and Fabrizio Vanni, *Il labirinto di Pontremoli. Storia e interpretazione di un simbolo di pellegrinaggio* (Firenze: Editoriale gli Arcipressi, 2002). Different readings of the church labyrinths are provided in a series of other essays; it is worth mentioning Adriano Peroni, "Il mosaico romano di San Michele Maggiore a Pavia: materiali per un'edizione," in *A Gustavo Vinay* (Spoleto, CISAM, 1977), 705-738.



Figure 4. Rome, Italy. Church of S. Maria in Aquiro. Floor mosaic (twelfth century?), now disappeared. From Julien Durand, “Les pavés-mosaïques en Italie et en France. II.—France.” *Annales Archéologiques par Didron aîné* 17 (1857): 118-127: 119.

a sense of admiration for a great and ancient city. The tradition of the church labyrinths appears at first sight to be more distant, but it is quite surprising to discover that two out of the five labyrinths considered here are depicted in texts connected with the practice of travel and pilgrimage (that touched on Christian territories as well: they are Ibn al-Qāṣṣ and al-Harawī). Moreover, two of these depictions are presented as part of the account by Hārūn ibn Yahyā, the presumed pilgrim on the Constantinople-Rome route (Ibn al-Qāṣṣ and the *Mujmal*). Taken together, they constitute the three oldest texts that attribute the labyrinth to Rome and not to Constantinople (the attribution to the latter being explicitly formulated only in the two more recent works, by al-Qazwīnī and al-Ṣāliḥī). We

should recall here, furthermore, that the Arabic and Persian accounts of Rome often focus on the majesty of the city's lived and practiced faith: they describe innumerable and immense churches, armies of priests, and elaborate liturgical rites.

At the same time, the circulation of the image of the labyrinth was connected to the tale of the Minotaur, who was often represented at the labyrinth's centre in both Roman mosaic and church depictions. The idea of the labyrinth as a prison was closely related to the myth of the Minotaur from the very beginning. Although there appear to be no traces of this narrative in Arabic and Persian literature, it would seem that this association was known and circulated, at least at the level of oral transmission.⁶² The double interpretation offered by our authors with regard to the labyrinths of Rome, thus, is substantially present in the oldest attributions and motifs that were central to the idea of the labyrinth and to its circulation.

We might ask ourselves whether the presence of Roman mosaic labyrinths in territories that were occupied by Muslim armies may have contributed to the transmission of this symbolic image into the various literary traditions of Islam. On the other hand, if we are to suggest a transfer of an iconographic nature, one fruitful area for further research is the depiction of the labyrinth in the cartographic tradition: for example, the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* (dated 1300, but based on more ancient sources) locates the island of Crete and its labyrinth erroneously, but significantly, in front of the Roman coast.⁶³ Such geographical slippage could have taken place, for example, in some *itineraria* that may have been viewed by Arab travellers.

⁶² There is a late, but significant labyrinth on a manuscript of the *Secretum de thesauro experimentorum ymaginationis hominum* by Giovanni Fontana (1395-1455). The center bears the Latin inscription *carcer* ("prison"). The manuscript is ca. 1420; see Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 138-139. More generally the western manuscript tradition where the labyrinth was often used as a figurative comment on various philosophical issues should be explored. On this, see Werner Batschelet-Massini, "Labyrinthzeichnungen in Handschriften," *Codices Manuscripti* 4 (1978): 3-65; Haubrichs, "Error inextricabilis;" Kern, *Labyrinth*, 139-205; Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 105-141. I would add the interesting presence of the icon of the labyrinth—with a political meaning—on the Emperor of Rome's vestments, according to one of the redactions of the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*: "Habeat et in diarodino laberinthum fabrefactum ex auro et margaritis;" see Frédéric Ozanam, *Documents inédits pour servir à l'histoire littéraire de l'Italie depuis le VIII^e siècle jusqu'au XIII^e* (Leipzig: H. Welter, 1897), 178.

⁶³ See Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, "Roma nella cartografia medievale (secoli IX-XIII)," in *Roma antica nel Medioevo. Mito, rappresentazioni, sopravvivenze nella 'Respublica Christiana' dei secoli IX-XIII* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2001), 209-229.

Again, the dual process by which the icon became historicized, and shifted from the first Rome to the second Rome on the Bosphorus, may have been influenced by the Jericho tradition (whose origin itself, however, most probably goes back to the idea of the city-labyrinth presented for the first time by the Roman mosaics, as Kern has observed). This process may also have relied on the attention many authors paid to the walls of Constantinople on the one hand, and to news about a particular jail in that city on the other. Overall, however, it would seem that the presence of the labyrinthine depictions of Rome, especially in the three most ancient texts that we have considered, is suggestive of a much more ancient and profound, if indirect, function that is both abstract and symbolic.

An echo of this process can be perceived in the last known manuscript labyrinth in an Arabic text. In a passage of the *Tahqīq mā li-l-Hind* ("Research on What Pertains to India") by Abū Rayḥan al-Bīrūnī (completed in 1030 CE), the celebrated Persian scientist and historian, who wrote primarily in Arabic, describes an Indian labyrinthine fortress in Laṅkā (Ceylon), the hiding place of the demon prince Rāvaṇa. Bīrūnī says that the fortress, defined as *multawī* (Arabic for 'tortuous, twisted'), "is called Thankat Mard, and it is the one that is called in our countries Jāwan Kuth, and could be related to Rūmiya; this can be shown by what I have drawn."⁶⁴ The image of a labyrinth follows. Bausani confirmed the scholarly view that the expression *Jāwan Kuth* derives from the Sanskrit *Yāwaṇa Kotī*, "Greek fortress." Interestingly enough, presently in southern India the labyrinth symbol is used for a game that is still called *Kotī* "castle."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Abū Rayḥan al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq mā li-l-Hind min maqūla maqbūla fī al-ʿaql aw mardhūla*, ed. Eduard Sachau (London: Trübner & Co., 1877), 158; Abū Rayḥan al-Bīrūnī, *Alberuni's India. An English Edition with Notes and Indices*, ed. and tr. Eduard Sachau, 2 vols. (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1910), 2:306-307; see also Bausani, "Islamic Culture and the Labyrinth" and Bausani "La cultura islamica e il labirinto."

⁶⁵ See Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 289-291; Bausani, "Islamic Culture and the Labyrinth," 17-19; Bausani "La cultura islamica e il labirinto," 57-59. Piemontese suggests the possible derivation of *Jāwan Kuth* from Greek *gaiáoxos*, "surrounding the earth," "protecting the country;" see Piemontese, "Roma nella cosmografia persiana medioevale," 510. On the labyrinth in the area around the Indian subcontinent see also Rosa Maria Cimino, "Il 'labirinto' di Simraongarh. Una testimonianza antica," in *La conoscenza dell'Asia e dell'Africa in Italia nei secoli XVIII e XIX*, eds. Aldo Gallotta e Ugo Marazzi, 3 vols. (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1989), 3:581-599; Rosa Maria Cimino, "A short note on a new Nepalese labyrinth," *East and West* 45, 1-4 (1995): 381-385; Staffan Lundén, "A Nepalese labyrinth," *East and West* 48 (1998): 117-134; John Kraft, "The Oldest labyrinth in India?" *Caerdroia* 35 (2005), 57-59.

However, the uncertainty about the different transcriptions and origins of its name reveals Bīrūnī's unfamiliarity with the structure he is describing and with the tales associated with it. The vague link with the city of Rome appears as a literary (and of course iconographic) topos in circulation at the time, to which the author makes only a passing and doubtful reference.

Umbilicus

The suggestions provided here concerning the possible route of the symbol of the labyrinth into the Arabic and Persian texts do not claim to solve, once and for all, the problem of the frequent overlap between Rome and Constantinople. Yet they might provide some insights into the more general question of the positioning of Rome by Muslim authors in the politico-cultural context of Eurasia. The Arabic (and then Persian) denomination *Rūm*, too often interpreted with almost exclusive reference to Byzantium and to the Byzantine Empire, including the region of Anatolia (and therefore, later, to the Turkish-Ottoman world), proves to be, on close inspection, much more ambiguous.⁶⁶ Some of the Arab and Persian historians explain the derivation of this term from the city of *Rūmās*,⁶⁷ just as many references to the area of Ancient Greece have been consciously made with the distinctive term *Yūnān* (Ionia). Thus, we often find the Roman emperors as much as the Byzantine ones referred to with the title of *malik al-Rūm* ('king of Rome') or *qayṣar al-Rūm* ('Caesar of Rome'). As observed by Khalil Samir, "the Bilād al-Rūm (the Country of the Rūm) changed its configuration in the course of history."⁶⁸

Maṣ'ūdī (Arab geographer and historian of the tenth century) declared: "Rome is the greatest seat of the Franks' kingdom in ancient as well as modern times."⁶⁹ To which we may add the already partially quoted passage from Yāqūt: "There resides the Pope, whom the Franks obey, since for

⁶⁶ See Khalil Samir, "Quelques notes sur les termes Rūm et Rūmī dans la tradition arabe. Etude de sémantique historique," in *La nozione di "romano" tra cittadinanza e universalità* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1984), 461-478; Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, 107-142.

⁶⁷ See for instance al-Maṣ'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 2:293-294.

⁶⁸ Samir, "Quelques notes," 477.

⁶⁹ al-Maṣ'ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf*, 182.

them he holds the rank of the *imām*.⁷⁰ The Franks (*Ifrañj*) were an entity recognized by the Arabs from the time of the presumed ambassadorial exchanges between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd, as well as during the Crusades. Since the Franks were considered nearly synonymous with Europe, Rome also became the city of the Franks for these Muslim observers. In an important tenth-century map (the work of the Arab geographer Ibn Hawqāl) the city is positioned at a distance from the rest of the Italian coast, and transferred to the French hinterland, on the Rhone, in the heart of the land of the *Ifrañj*.⁷¹ This combination Rūm-Constantinople-Rome-Franks, to which it would be possible to add numerous other examples, is explained only partly by the inevitable errors arising from geographical distance, onomastic proximity, or—more generally—the fragility of transmission. On the contrary, it reflects the allusive and exemplary lucidity of the Islamic literary tradition that we have discussed: to these Muslim authors, Rome is without doubt the original *umbilicus* of the Christian world, whatever form it takes.

In the medieval Arabic and Persian texts, as André Miquel has observed, Rome is presented to us as a place at the frontier of the real world,⁷² a gigantic symbol of a century-long history, of an unequalled monumental tradition, of a worldwide and truly respected faith. Despite the distortions due to distance and precarious transmission, these accounts contain aspects of (literary) intimacy, and appear to be the fruit of an admiration for the city. The heritage of Constantine, founder of the Christian Empire, becomes visible in the wonders associated with the *Campus Lateranensis* (a mirror to the parallel tradition in the Latin *mirabilia*). The faith is manifested in the immense quantity and the amazing richness of its churches, and in the city's devotional practices and liturgical rites. In these texts, Rome emerges as having explicit links with the holy city of Jerusalem, but the city also appears as the powerful result of its remote apotropaic origins

⁷⁰ Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 2:867.

⁷¹ See Charles F. Beckingham, "Ibn Hawqāl's Map of Italy," in *Iran and Islam. In Memory of the Late Vladimir Minorsky*, ed. Clifford E. Bosworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971), 73–78. Could such a representation be related to Charlemagne's attempt to build a new Rome in Aquisgrana? For this topic, see Mario D'Onofrio, *Roma e Aquisgrana* (Naples: Liguori, 1996); Caspar Ehlers, ed., *Deutsche Königspfalzen. Beiträge zu ihrer historischen und archäologischen Erforschung. VIII. Places of power, Orte der Herrschaft, Lieux du pouvoir* (Göttingen: Max-Planck-Institut Für Geschichte, 2007), at 181–187, with the related bibliography.

⁷² André Miquel, "Rome chez les géographes arabes," 287–291.

that, in the case of a few texts, coagulated into the icon of the labyrinth. The wonderful buildings described, the shining treasures (including the furnishings of the Temple of Jerusalem that were said to light the road as far as a horse ride of five nights) all served to reveal the city from afar, from a literary distance. They served to show the traveller or, more likely, the learned Muslim reader, what *Rūma*, *Rūmiya* was: the heart of the Christian Empire (whether it be Byzantine, Roman or Frankish) and, thanks to the splendour of its wonders, a magnet for myriads of pilgrims from its immense territory.

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